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## Introduction

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# Introduction

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## 1. Background

Virtual Exchange (VE) is a practice, supported by research, that consists of sustained, technology-enabled, people-to-people education programmes or activities in which constructive communication and interaction takes place between individuals or groups who are geographically separated and/or from different cultural backgrounds, with the support of educators or facilitators (EVOLVE, 2019).

The Evaluating and Upscaling Telecollaborative Teacher Education (EVALUATE) project was a European policy experiment funded by Erasmus+ between 2017 and 2019. The EVALUATE consortium trained teacher trainers and organised VEs which involved over 1,000 student teachers at 34 initial teacher education institutions in Europe and beyond. The guiding research question for the study was as follows:

- Will participation in VE contribute to the development of competences which student teachers need to teach, collaborate, and innovate effectively in a digitalised and cosmopolitan world?

A full report (The EVALUATE Group, 2019a) on the participants, the methodological approach and the main findings is available [here](#). An executive summary (The EVALUATE Group, 2019b) can be found [here](#).

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The conference concluding the EVALUATE project took place in September 2019 at the University of León in Spain. A number of colleagues answered our call for submissions to the conference proceedings. The articles you find in this volume provide a window into the multifaceted contributions not only to the conference, but to the field of telecollaboration and VE at large. We hope you enjoy finding out about the many different ways in which our colleagues engage with this innovative pedagogical approach that combines the deep impact of intercultural dialogue and exchange with the broad reach of digital technology.

The contributions to the proceedings are subdivided into three sections starting with ‘soundbites’ from the keynotes by Rodrigo Ballester, Barbara Moser-Mercer, and Paige Ware, followed by research studies, and wrapping up with a number of practical examples from the field of VE implementation.

## 2. Book organisation

### 2.1. Keynotes

As you have access to the recordings of the keynotes and we are also making the full transcripts available to you here, we have selected a few pertinent quotes from each speaker to give you a flavour of what they said.

#### Rodrigo Ballester<sup>3</sup>

“What about the 90% of students who do not benefit from mobility”?

“In terms of digital skills we often point to the teachers [...] The truth is that even the majority of the youngsters are not digitally competent”.

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3. <https://videos.unileon.es/video/5d78eaa68f420872148b45ea>

“Language is another aspect that we have to look at very carefully. The objective of 1+1+1 is to be able to speak your own language plus another European language plus another foreign language [...] to make sure that people not only learn English, but also develop the DNA of the European Union, which is diversity; cultural diversity and linguistic diversity”.

“Let me also speak a bit about teachers. [...] Without motivated and acknowledged teachers [...] nothing will happen, nothing will be different. [...] There is also a problem of social acknowledgement, prestige, authority, and respect”.

“Those problems [...] social cohesion, common values, and a sense of belonging to teachers’ training, all have a point in common with virtual exchanges. Their beauty is that if they are done well and are widespread, they can address partially every single big problem that I have identified in the European Education Area. That is why I think that we all have to see the future of virtual exchanges with optimism”.

#### **Barbara Moser-Mercer<sup>4</sup>**

“If there’s anything that you want to know about education in emergencies, INEE [International Network for Education in Emergencies] has an incredible number of resources for you to dig into especially for teacher training. They have a special group called Teachers in Crisis and Conflict with wonderful material all freely downloadable”.

“Understanding humanitarian principles is your first obligation. It is being impartial, neutral; to do no harm. [...] Every day our team needs to ask itself are we sure we are not doing more harm”?

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4. <https://videos.unileon.es/video/5d78f0948f4208775a8b4567>

“The other network is a network that we co-created, with the support of various donors over the years, called the Connected Learning in Crisis Consortium. [...] It mostly brings together higher education in institutions, but the majority of members are NGOs [Non-Governmental Organisations] engaged in tertiary education”.

“ We are not in it for the short semester or less than a semester but really looking at building a community that hopefully becomes independent and more self-sufficient, looking first and foremost at the contextualised needs. What we have in Geneva is irrelevant. What they need is where we start. Then we go and see what we have that matches and how we adapt what we do. [...] I hope I have given you a taste of what a virtual exchange can look like in the low level technology that we are trying to use”.

“The solutions that we implement are through working with pedagogy. We do not offer a course on conflict resolution, but we have developed and adopted a pedagogical approach that forces and obliges students to work together in a non-conflictual way. It is incidental learning but not in your face”.

### **Paige Ware<sup>5</sup>**

“I would characterise the period in the 1990’s as a period of high anticipation [...] The period between the turn of the century and around the time that social media really took off was a period of collective creativity among researchers and teacher educators, and I would characterise the last ten years as one of rising stakes”.

“To summarise the first act, we had a high anticipation for real intercultural interactions. Technology was basically a vehicle for contact at that point. It did not feel that complicated yet. It just felt really cool.

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5. <https://videos.unileon.es/video/5d791ea28f420872148b45f6>

Then the curriculum was focused upon exposure. Bring in cool stuff from other countries from other cultures or from sub-cultures within the culture. Start to juxtapose. It was a nice time.”.

“To summarise, Act 2 was a really exciting time and there was a major spike in research in and around telecollaboration. This period was characterised when we coalesced around certain core questions, certain core technologies, and it was exciting to be a part of that. We were looking at how to engage students more deeply, because early on we realised just enacting people is not enough. [...] as researchers we are committed to understanding what is taking place inside those thousands of connections. [...] That ushered in where we are now, where the stakes are rising”.

“We have several of you in this room who have insisted over the last 15 years that we have to have dialogical action [...] it is not just about contact. It is about [...] bringing people together and helping them act on the world in positive ways [...] it is a little political.”.

We hope these snippets from the three keynote presentations at the EVALUATE conference have made you curious and that you are inspired to find out more.

## **2.2. Research studies**

The three research studies in this section focus on topics as diverse as the development of intercultural communicative competences with a specific focus on intercultural awareness, the issue of authenticity in VE for students using English as a lingua franca, and VEs’ impact on teachers’ pedagogical practice.

**Dora Loizidou and Dina Savlovskia** explore the issue of positive and negative face in facilitating intercultural awareness in the context of a six-week VE project between students at the University of Cyprus and the University of Latvia. They used the frame of the Cultura project ([Furstenberg](#), [Levet](#), [English](#), & [Maillet](#),

2001) as a basis for task design. Being especially interested in students' public self-image, the results of their mixed-method research show that students do not express themselves freely in the discussion forums in order to protect their personal and perceived national image. Analysing forum messages on the basis of eight different categories the authors find that a majority of students posted in the forum without addressing their peers and/or commenting on earlier messages. In the course of the project, students developed different forms of politeness messages, with major politeness strategies being to avoid discussion of critical points due to cultural shock, a strategy which the authors explain by the fact that students used open public forums and that there was a lack of familiarity between group members.

Following an ethnographic research approach based on students' reflective journals, questionnaires, and interviews, **Alexandra Reynolds** looks at the issue of authenticity when using English as a lingua franca in a VE in opposition to a traditional English for specific purposes course format (the majority of students being chemistry students). Over the duration of a term, French-speaking students interacted in weekly webinars in English on the topic of *Newcomers and Nationalism* with non-native English-speaking students from other participating universities in Europe and the Southern Mediterranean. The research focus lay especially on authentic learner experiences, and data analysis concluded with a five-point model showing how authentic learner experience manifested itself in the VE, covering community formation, altered world views, pedagogical conditions, and an improved understanding of English language learning through the use of English as a lingua franca.

And finally a study by **Melinda Dooly** dealing with an issue in VE research which is still largely under-explored, namely the actual impact of VE on teachers' practice in educational contexts. Her work focuses on teacher education graduates, specialising in teaching foreign languages (French and English) in primary education, and coming from the Faculty of Education at the Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona. The VEs, covering 14 years (2004-2018), were set up with a colleague at the University of Illinois Urbana Champaign and prepared student teachers for telecollaborative teaching once they started

their professional life. The paper provides a clear and succinct insight into the methodology of surveying the teachers. Results showed that over 50 % of the graduates integrated VE into their own teaching, especially the younger teachers. Interestingly, quite a few of the teachers who said no in the survey to the question whether they had integrated VE, indicated that they intended to do so in the future. While task design did not pose a problem, external issues such as problems with technology and student-related and organisational issues created challenges for the teachers. Little support from school administration or colleagues constituted the main challenge for the younger and with that less experienced teachers. The study concludes that being able to fully experience a VE as a trainee, “sensitizes them [student-teachers] to those aspects of task design which are unique to online contexts” in an ‘integrated and holistic’ manner (Kurek & Müller-Hartmann, 2017, p. 8).

### **2.3. Practical examples**

In this section on practical examples of VE we cover different course designs, one focusing on developing empathy, the other targeting knowledge and skills building in relation to organising VEs. We also present three examples of VE that report on instructors’ collaborative reflection of their VE, the development of global citizenship through civic action, and on a rather innovative approach from the field of gamification working where digital escape rooms were being used.

In the context of designing a VE between students at Ludwig-Maximilians University in Germany and their peers at the University of Maryland Baltimore County in the United States, **Irina Golubeva and Ivett Guntersdorfer** have developed a preliminary framework for self-reflective meta-analysis tasks. The latter aim to foster empathy development alongside developing intercultural communicative competences in VE. While engaging with critical socio-political issues, the students carry out a number of meta-analysis tasks in the course of the VE. They complete several self-reflective survey questionnaires with items relating to the affective reactions of their VE partners, thus becoming aware of the emotional dimensions of intercultural encounters.



**Angelos Konstantinidis** presents a 12-week elective module in the online MA in Digital Technologies for Language Teaching programme at the University of Nottingham. Following the generic model for designing research in education by **McKenney and Reeves (2012)**, which encompasses analysis/exploration, design/construction, and evaluation/reflection, the author describes the VE that focuses on knowledge and skills building and introduces students to the theories and practices of VE through a critical and multicultural lens. As a result, they develop competences in organising VE activities, and are engaged in research leading to the production of digital artefacts such as articles analysing VE projects and study reviews as well as video presentations on various topics subsequently published as open educational resources (<http://telecollaboration20.pbworks.com/>).

**Mary-Jane Radford Arrow** who at the time of the conference was based at the TU in Berlin, Germany presents her first VE, a 14-week collaboration with a partner from another technical university in Łódź, Poland, with engineering and natural sciences students, respectively. The exploratory practice approach chosen considered the on-going critical conversations and reflections between the two instructors. Their 18 weekly meetings, including sessions before and after the VE, covered four phases from (1) synchronisation of course matters, to (2) decision-making of tasks and choice of tools, to (3) looking at students' interactions in the VE, and to (4) final reflections and integration which included generating ideas for the following term.

In her contribution, **Roberta Trapè** takes the development of intercultural communicative competence a step further by focusing on the development of global citizenship through the facilitation of real civic engagement in student participants' local communities. In a 12-week VE, students at the University of Virginia, United States, worked with a group of students at an upper-secondary school in Pavia, Italy. Both English and Italian were used, and face-to-face foreign language lessons were blended with Skype-mediated digital learning in dyads or triads. Real-life tasks following the so called progressive exchange model format (see **O'Dowd & Ware, 2009**) asked the groups to explore issues of gender equality, to plan, and eventually implement a civic action project in

their local communities. They did so by designing a plea for renaming a place or street in favour of a woman who was seen as especially relevant for the history of their community. Each dyad/triad chose a woman and wrote a proposal in English and Italian which was presented to the respective mayors of Pavia and Charlottesville.

With their innovative contribution on digital escape rooms in the field of gamification, **Julie Stephens de Jonge and Belén Labrador** present a motivating task concept for a three-months VE between learners of English (University of León) and learners of Spanish (University of Central Missouri). The challenges in form of various enigmas placed in a context of saving the world in a dystopian future and facilitated by a number of digital tools in the digital escape rooms led to various forms of collaboration between the local teams. Apart from practicing the target L2s, students developed intercultural communicative competence and critical thinking skills in the course of the project.

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